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AMERICA AT WAR

BY

REV. WILLIAM B. AYERS



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A sermon delivered April 8th, 1917
at the Park and Downs Congregational Church
Wollaston Park, Mass.

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AMERICA AT WAR

The long moral struggle is over. The extremists have prevailed in Germany, while in America righteousness has become another name for wrath. All the just, righteous, and kindly endeavors of our government to maintain the code of international rights and human safeguards have been made the object of scorn, and the instruments by which royal arrogance sought to fulfill its schemes.

Our record is clean. We have leaned backward to maintain the cause of peace.

In the pursuit of this cause we have been called cowards and selfish people. So did we yearn for peace, that the world mistook this longing for selfishness, and we ourselves began to doubt and grow a little discouraged and ashamed.

It seemed as if perhaps we did not realize the full meaning in this crisis of the world, as if we neither rose to its full apprehension nor did our share. We seemed unable to adjust our lives to the tremendous condition abroad, or to compress our loose-jointed thoughts and our luxurious and voluptuous tastes into the compass in which a century reduced itself to months.

We had grown so petty and partisan that the great struggle seemed to have no meaning for us, or if it did we had become indifferent to its most vital and lasting issues. We could not unite upon a single great enterprise.

But America has awakened and now she is finding her soul. We have been trying to ward off this moment for a long time. At last it has come and our duty is clear. The thought and purpose of our nation should have full, immediate expression, and unqualified support. All partisanship should disappear, all selfish interests should be laid aside, and the unity of the nation should be proved by our patriotic allegiance to duty, our devoted loyalty to any plan marked by the hand of God, and our united effort to make effective our Christian ideals.

In my lecture on "The Great War," October, 1914, I made the statement that America would eventually be drawn into the conflict. This, without regard to the poli-

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tical complexion of our government or the personality of our President. The drift was all that way and we could not help ourselves. America could not be true to the ideals which for over a century had been hers, and not take part in a struggle that, when cleared of its misapprehensions, became a vast tug-of-war between tyranny and democracy. We could not see democracy destroyed. Against the common danger all democracy must unite.

To the student of history and of current events it seemed impossible for the freest people in the world, and those who most loved liberty and the things which belong to liberty, to keep their hearts and hands out of a struggle in which autocracy and tyranny sought to wrest the liberties from the free people of other continents.

Germany's manner of entering the war proved to some of us that we could not remain out of it.

Had Germany refrained from an attack on France, had she massed her troops upon her own frontier, and waited upon her own land to receive the full force of the French attack, our people might have had much sympathy for the German cause.

If then Germany had inflicted defeat on the French, and invaded the Frenchmen's territory without violating the neutrality of Belgium, England and America would most likely never have joined in the war. The blunders of Germany have all been blunders of judgment concerning high human sentiment. She has failed to reckon with the moral convictions of other people. Her judgments have all been based upon material considerations and material rewards.

In no way is the national German character more completely revealed than in this failure to assign to other nations any motive for heroic activity higher than that of selfish ambition and criminal greed.

"Will England join in the war against us?" inquired her generals. "No," answered her diplomats, "because it is not in her interest to do so. She has other ambitions to engage her and other fields of profitable enterprise to keep her busy."

The German Ambassador to England so completely misread the British mind that up to the very last he informed his government that Great Britain would not join in the war.

The hatred of the Germans for England is based upon the fact that Britain turned the tide against her, and entered the war when the Germans, by their peculiar reasoning, could see no object in her entrance and therefore did not expect her as an opponent. They will probably hate us for like reasons.

It was the same with the Belgians. The Germans were amazed at the opposition of that heroic people. "Why should they object to our invasion of their land?" inquired the Teutonic statesmen. "We will pay them back."

The Germans had gone stupid and mad with materialism.

They did not realize that sentiment is not dead in the world and that ideals yet remain.

It was in the period between 1850 and 1880 that the materialistic philosophy had its rise and development in the German mind.

It is logical that out of this should grow the doctrine of force and selfishness. Brutality is but a step beyond materialism. In fact the Bismarck method and scheme could not be imposed save on a nation philosophically prepared to receive it.

We think our quarrel is with the German government alone. But the government cannot be detached from the people. We will find before we are done that the vast majority of the German people stand solidly back of their government, not only in the conduct but the conception of the war, and of the German mission to determine the destiny of the world.

Some of her representative thinkers long busied themselves trying to explain away the redemptive mission and the loving nature of Jesus Christ. The theory of mercy was beyond them and they were incapable of comprehending the Sacrificial Nature of The Divine.

Before this war was dreamed of German scholars made the same assault upon the person of Christ that they have made upon Belgium and northern France.

With terrible ruthlessness and idiotic cruelty they have laid waste that fairest land, destroying its sanctuaries and its homes, carrying away into bondage, and worse than bondage, its able-bodied men and fair-bodied women. This is a logical outcome of the rash and meaningless assault they have made on Christ.

One by one, they have sought to take away from him his merciful meanings, and his divine functions, until they have left him spiritually naked, stumbling under the burden of a meaningless cross. If the German thinkers would denude God, they would not hesitate to rob and destroy man.

The mind that thought itself equal to the task of revising the Nature of the Divine would certainly not quail before the task of altering the map of the world.

It was indeed but a logical and a natural step to go from the Divine revision to the earthly.

If a people are wise enough to uncover God they must, of all people, be those best gifted for the business of managing this world. The dream of world dominance, in the German mind, has furnished a powerful incentive to multi-form activities. Societies have been formed, fostered by the government, for the creation of other societies all over the world, especially in the Western Hemisphere, whose business it would be to make the German language a requirement in the public high schools. It has been a boast, among Germans, that the German language would become, in time, the speech of America. Two days before our declaration of war, a group of Germans sat in a Boston audience, and whispered in their mother tongue: "The flag of the Fatherland will yet fly over the golden dome of the State House."

It is a race gone insane with conceit, having lost all true sense of proportion. This has been a fatal flaw in the German temperament. It has revealed itself in the strategy of the war. The Germans, being materialistic themselves, assumed that the Belgians and the British were likewise, and would be guided by selfish motives alone. It never occurred to them that the English temperament would not allow England to stand supinely by and consent to the destruction of her little neighbor to the East. The moment Belgium was invaded England's declaration of war was inevitable. That was a fatal mistake for the German cause. But Germany did not realize the seriousness of this blunder, because she had lost her sense of moral values and had come to that place, of which the Bible speaks, where wrong looks right.

Germany has been wonderful in her mechanism of war. As a machine, her army has been without a peer in his-

tory, and the military strategy she had devised has, on the whole, been sound.

The blunders she has made have been the blunders of moral reasoning. Every mad foolish thing she has done has been the result of moral blindness undermining her strategy and making her mechanical skill of no avail.

She has multiplied her enemies by her unmorality in war.

The Anglo-Saxon is distinguished by the quality of fairness.

From boyhood we are taught to fight fairly and cleanly and to remember, even in our wrath, the rules of the game.

There have been no rules in this game of slaughter that Germany has waged.

We cannot join our fortunes to such a people whose mental processes are abhorrent to ours.

From the very beginning of the war, Germany has steadily maintained a course of conduct which has alienated our sympathies more and more, and which could not possibly continue without making war between us inevitable. Such acts as the invasion and wasting of the land of the Belgians, one of the garden spots of the earth, the soil of which has been so often fertilized by the blood of heroes.

Such an act was the burning of the university city of Louvain.

This was abhorrent to an age revering learning and holding in high esteem the designs of beauty and utility of cultured minds.

Next, the deliberate destruction of the temple of Rheims, that which is the high dream of man, frozen into forms of architecture. Rheims has been one of the pilgrim spots of the world. It stood for the religious aspirations of man, and seemed to condense in its own exquisite form all those conceptions of beauty which man's high instincts have been able to incorporate into stone.

Then came that thing so repugnant to us—a thing that we could not do,—indeed would slay our own soldiers for doing; a thing not credited to civilized peoples, the shooting of Edith Cavell as a spy. We began to wonder what kind of creatures these Germans could be.

Then they deliberately bragged to the world that they were to sink the most majestic vessel that plied the seas, a ship that bore, as its armament, not batteries of guns,

but women and children and other peaceable citizens, going inoffensively about their own duties.

The unbelievable occurred. The Lusitania was sent to the bottom by a blow struck in the dark, a dastardly deed done secretly. We knew then that the first blow had been struck at us. Not only at our liberties but at our lives.

We knew then what was bound to follow, other blows would come. Our inactivity, based on Christian conceptions, would be termed cowardly submission, and the full torrent of insane scheming would be turned against us.

Then followed the massacre of the Armenians. Hundreds of thousands of them driven onto the desert to starve, their women and girls carted away to be ravished, ruined and devoured, by the imbecile passions of the swarthy Turk. We knew that a word from Germany would end this, and we were amazed that such a word was not forthcoming. We could not understand how Germany could allow such a thing. But now we understand fully. Germany had turned her back upon Western civilization. She had joined herself to the East as against the West, to the heathen world as against the Christian, to the Turk as against the white; her Emperor pretending to be a Mohammedan, and her statesmen becoming the champions of the faith. While destroying Belgium and making slaves of her people, while bombarding from the skies the homes of women and the cradles of children, and sinking passenger ships without warning, Germany has been aiding Turkey with military forces while Turkey massacred a million Armenian Christians. Our Lord was constantly resorting to measures of protection for his disciples, and it would seem to be one of the duties of Christianity to protect and defend the citizens of the Kingdom.

We know now why the German mind consented to the ravishing of the Armenians. Not only had she renounced the humanitarian ideals of Western Civilization, but she had become saturated with the same consuming poison, for she did in France and Belgium what she allowed Turkey to do in Armenia. The German soldiers have sat at the feet of the Turks and learned; and well they have learned their lesson. Now the Germans are carting away the beautiful girls of France, and the fair maidens of Belgium, to what dastardly purpose we dare not think. Their fathers and mothers they have separated, and driven into the

Empire to slave in the mills and the fields. You can fancy your mothers, wives, sisters and daughters in this predicament and then say whether you believe we should not wage war against that sort of thing.

We have not mentioned the clouds of poison gas and flaming oil introduced by the Teuton to become a commonplace of war.

Then the ships that began to go down became multitude, not the vessels of war but the floating arks of peace; the Red Cross vessels, ships bearing the sick and wounded with the word "hospital" painted large on their sides, and the sign of mercy on the stack and flying from every mast-head. Steamers were sunk laden with food for the starving people of Belgium, gathered by generous hands and consecrated by pious hearts. These followed the bleeding pathway that leads to the ocean's depths.

Unarmed cities by the seaside had long been targets of Teutonic wrath. From the seas and from the skies blind hate rained destruction upon them, to no apparent purpose of war only the love of killing, women and children, resting in innocent and unsuspecting slumbers, mangled in their sleep.

Our agents in Belgium, messengers of mercy and bearers of love to stricken people, were treated so meanly that they must needs withdraw.

Then, in spite of promises and formal agreements to the contrary, the ruthless and terrible submarine warfare was resumed and we knew that our day of reckoning had come.

The highways of the world Germany sought to make dangerous and deadly for all. The arteries of the world's trade she sought to cut, by stealth and under-the-sea methods which could not be supervised, restrained or controlled, or brought under the rules of peace or war. Our ships began to go to the bottom in common with those of other neutrals. American lives, whether women or men, were snatched and snuffed like rats in a plagued city.

Our nation became menaced from within as well as from without. Bomb outrages multiplied. The country was beset by spies. The liberties we extended were shamelessly abused. Our hospitality was violated without conscience.

Then it was found that German statecraft had con-

spired, in the very hour of its most friendly assertions, its loudest declarations of esteem, to foment strife and revolution within our land and assault upon our nation from Mexico and Japan. Indeed, German diplomacy had conspired the dismemberment of our nation.

If there is any man who, in the face of these facts, will say that to go to war against this monster of iniquity is a wicked and reproachful thing, he himself has lost the distinctions of conscience and the sense of sacred right. Could I gather a dozen sons about me I would feel that I could dedicate them to no higher duty than that of redeeming the world from the clutches of this mad man among the nations. If, in this service for the world, every one of them should die I would feel that they had died gloriously to make high and lasting contribution to the world's good.

America could not do other than she has.

We would be untrue to all that we have been and have taught as a nation by any other course.

We have been considered as the people of all others most ready to sacrifice ourselves for those whom nobody else thought worthy of aid. The impoverished and oppressed and caste-bound peoples of the world have, for a century, looked upon America as the place of hope and friendliness and emancipation.

We would deal treacherously with our ideals if we did not reach a strong arm across the seas to rescue Europe from the embrace of this maniac.

We have been the rescuer of stricken peoples before. We have given our best life to save.

We have been trusted and beloved, because we have been willing to suffer and bleed and die for the privilege of giving others a chance at life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We have believed in government by the people; that government is the servant of the people and not their master and tyrant.

We have stood for the salvation of the people from the clutches of those who would cheat and exploit them for personal greed and ambition. On the whole, we have practiced this, faultily always, stumblingly and stupidly often, many times with corruption in local means of government, yet having a marvellous power of adjustment and self correction.

Our general effort has been toward justice. Our faults have been those arising from too much liberty; liberty abused or held in light esteem.

It was a long time before the issues of this war became clear to the mind of the Western Hemisphere, but they are clarified now, for the alignment is very distinct. On the one side are the democratic governments, on the other the autocratic forms.

Among the peoples engaged, the war has been waged with these two distinctive ideals in control.

One group has waged a dastardly, cruel, tyrant warfare, not considerate of any rights or liberties, or of the humanities, and acknowledging no law save that of its own blind greed, and the cowardly fear that passed under the name of military necessity,—such was the autocratic form of war.

The Democracies have, on the whole, fought fairly. They have fought with a minimum of cruelty and with the humanities ever in mind. So far as human life is concerned they have conducted themselves according to the rules of the game.

We know now that the future of this world will be determined by the kind of foe that wins the war.

We know that if cruel and greedy autocracy wins, the world will be veiled in a web of deceit, and scheming, damaging plots will prevail and peace-destroying conspiracies.

The death knell of democracy will be heard if autocracy wins, and the purpose of democracy will be so weakened and paralyzed and discouraged as to render it unequal to the task of reconstruction and self-perpetuation. In fact it is the aim of autocracy to destroy popular government.

The war was hatched in the brain of an autocratic clique.

Such a clique and such a power would be impossible in a free governing nation.

Kaiserism knows that, if the democratic idea continues to spread, kaiserism will be destroyed; therefore the purpose to discourage the democratic idea and to render impotent and sterile the growing strength of popular rights and popular representation.

Against such a scheme free America cannot help but align herself. Willing and perpetual self-sacrifice is the cost of keeping the spirit of liberty alive in the world.

The denuded forests of France and the poisoned wells of water give mute testimony to the kind of world we could expect under the dominance of the Teutonic idea.

At first the Germans did not think that we would come in, because they did not credit us with sentiment either. We were a greedy people, eager to snatch what we could from the flames of the world's destruction; a race of money sharks, not at all eager to sacrifice our ease and luxury and life for the things of honor and justice.

Oh, we could be counted safe while autocracy made a meal of the heart and soul of the world.

Then the fortunes of war shifted. Autocracy saw that it was not going to win. Its colonies were snatched away and the power over the future of Europe seemed slipping from its grasp.

Something must be done to save the face of autocracy and to re-establish its waning prestige.

When the Russian Czar was dethroned Kaiserism saw the hand-writing upon the wall. Reforms were immediately promised: the establishment of wider franchise and more liberal laws. But the thought of the people must be kept engaged, that they might have little time to ponder their own condition or launch any system of their own devising.

What better for this purpose than a new war,—with a great, new, powerful enemy.

German diplomacy is also aware of our repugnance for foreign alliances. This we have inherited from the fathers of our country.

Why not engage America at war, and gamble on this repugnance, to keep America from making any alliance with France and Great Britain as to the conduct and termination of the war.

This will leave America engaged at war with Germany after she has accepted the terms of the allies, and Germany's European enemies have laid down their arms.

Defeated in Europe, having lost her colonies and able to extract no indemnity from her foes, but rather compelled to bear the cost to herself, and repay the damage to her enemies, Germany will be bankrupt, and her people will most likely rise in denunciation against their rulers, and snatch the sceptre from their hands. Therefore, as a measure of self-preservation on the part of the Hohen-

zollerns, some provision must be made to recover the equivalent of what has been lost. Where could this be done more easily than in the Western Hemisphere? The vast Central and South American Continent is a mine, the surface of which has hardly been scratched. The United States, the richest country in the world, and in many ways the weakest, an unprotected and unprepared storehouse of the world's treasure.

After the Allies have ceased to fight, Germany will be left at war with America; Germany with five million veteran soldiers and a navy greater than that of America, and with flocks of submarines as well.

Could not the American navy be engaged at one point while an army was landed at another; at that moment a general up-rising of loyal Germans within the country, aid from the Mexicans perhaps, the coast cities taken from the rear or the sea, and a vast tribute exacted, including Alaska and Panama and the Island possessions? This would leave America humiliated and crushed and unable to bar Kaiserism from a free hand in South America.

It is a foolish dream, you say? Yes, the whole war was a foolish dream three short years ago.

The whole vast enterprise was pronounced by scholars and statesmen improbable and absurd. The most impossible things have become recorded facts.

Our people and our legislators should be keenly alive to this condition. They should not be deluded with the idea of our isolation so that they will decline to make treaties laying down the limits of the war, our purposes and goals, and agreeing with France and England not to make a separate peace.

Our future security requires that America and France and England now pool their forces, together with the new Republic of Russia, whose recent assertion of popular rights has made possible the exalted statement of our President, that no one of them be left to battle for its existence after the others have laid down their arms.

We cannot fight Germany and Austria, Bulgaria and Turkey alone, with possibly Mexico in the bargain, for the rumblings are already heard in the land to the south of us.

The over-cautious and narrow-visioned people and politicians must not be allowed to bind and gag the nation

and leave her helpless against the international assassin.

It seems strange that laymen could foretell two years ago that this nation would be drawn into the war, while governmental circles scoffed at the idea.

Some of us will never forget how our fears were ridiculed, and how eagerly we awaited some clear, high enunciation of principle.

We were called militarists because we foresaw dark events ahead and called upon the nation to prepare itself for them.

We will never cease to regret that long year in which so little was done to make the nation ready for the trial that seemed inevitable. But all that is in the past. We have crawled into war hardly buckling on our armor as we did so.

We have a great naval program but it will be some years before we can finish and utilize all the vessels.

We have a fine army program, and multitudes of willing and enthusiastic men, but a year hardly suffices for the creation of a vast modern army.

What we lack in arms and vessels, airships, submarines and munitions must be made up by clear-visioned, sharp-witted diplomacy.

We must, as the first measure of this diplomacy, make impotent Germany's greedy scheme. We must not leave ourselves to fight her alone, but make an immediate treaty with the free governments of France and Russia and England, agreeing that none of us will make separate peace, but that all will safeguard the interests of each, and each of all. Any early proffers of peace coming to us from Germany will be designed to deceive us and delay the formulation of such a treaty. We must not be misled by them.

We should immediately dispatch a unit of soldiers to France and Belgium, that our flag may fly over the trenches, that the hearts of liberating soldiers be cheered by its presence, and the world see that we are not a race of cowards willing to venture food and treasure and everything but ourselves. We must be willing to receive our baptism and bear our part of the common burden in the forefront of the battle's lines.

Our entrance into the war needs no justification. If righteousness is right then our entry into this kind of war cannot be called a sin. In fact it is the only thing that

we as a Christian nation could possibly do. If we have sinned it is in not going in sooner.

The genius of Christianity is self-sacrifice. The Christian man will venture his life to stop and dispose of the mad dog that rushes through the streets snapping at children and spreading the virus of his deadly disease.

The Christian man will risk his life and give his life to disarm and subdue the maniac who strikes and slays those within reach of his madness.

The Christian man will throw his dignity to the breezes and compel the drunkard to silence his oaths and cease his violence in the presence of women. The Christian man will punish the seducer of children and restrain him against the repetition of his crime. We have some Christian duties for which we need not apologize. Indeed we must apologize in shame if we do them not.

Talk about the wickedness of force. Christianity itself is a force. There is nothing more forceful than a quick and active remedy. It takes action and power to eliminate disease.

The body of man suffers violence when it is being purged of fever and plague. Christ said that his kingdom would set brothers and children and parents at variance, one with the other. His kingdom, as a reformatory element, was a force that worked violently and stirred evil to retaliation. Speech is a force. The pen is a force. And pen and tongue have made more wounds than swords. Surgery is a force that cuts and destroys to a blessed purpose of healing and salvation. Between the sword and the sermon is only a matter of degree, and one can be made as redemptive as the other.

Between Germany at war and America at war is all the moral difference in the world. She is fighting to destroy and to grab; we are fighting to save and to free. Our action needs no other justification. We are willing to lay down our best life that the principles and ideals for which we have fought before shall not perish from the earth. In the light of this ideal, victory will be ours if we are brave and wise and farseeing. God will give us of His strength, for it is true of nations, as of individuals, that to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. If Germany had any

real faith she could not do what she has done. She gave up the things of the soul, and now the things of material achievement must be taken away.

With the solemn prayers of Good Friday upon our lips we have taken up the burden of war on the anniversary of our Saviour's Crucifixion. What is to be the outcome of our lenten sacrifice only the years can reveal. It must be faced as a stern, sober, terrible task. It is no time for wild passion, unreasoning hate or brainless excitement. Let not the flame of senseless wrath consume us. Let no impulse of blind consuming revenge drive us to blushing extremities.

Let no greedy aspirations take hold upon the national life to lead us from the paths of spiritual rectitude. There must be for us no thought of conquest, no prizes save those goals of the spirit which we seek to assert, to liberate and redeem. We are a liberal nation, now called to subdue and arrest an aggressive imperialistic one. And it is a just summons. Surely the advance of democracy is compatible with the spiritual enterprise of the Christian Kingdom. And a league of democracies bound together by the tie of a just co-operation will make fertile soil for the Christian gospel. As time passes and our activities become more furious, we must not permit ourselves to forget the convictions with which we began and the goal we first had in mind. Our righteous purposes must be kept clearly and constantly before us, or we shall become entangled in a passion that is blind and furious and self-destroying. It devolves upon us in a very peculiar sense to keep alive the kindly spirit and those necessary spiritual elements upon which only a just and lasting peace can be established. We seek to proclaim the doctrine of human rights and world security—then let our national and personal conduct be such that we shall be able to impose upon the world at the end of the war a more liberal sprinkling of this doctrine than it ever knew before. We are not fighting to subdue a single enemy but to keep alive a principle and to do what we can to make it universal.

If we crush our enemy, but lose sight of our ideal, we are defeated and the world is infinitely worse off than if we had never gone into the fray. We are fighting for the security of nations against imperial ambitions and the madness of imperial pride.

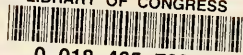


We have indeed entered the war with deep and genuine reluctance. Even those of us who in the past have criticized our president's extremely pacifistic attitude will be glad now that he was for so long a time doggedly opposed to war. With so much division in the country, so much irresolution, his method has, on the whole, proved sounder than we thought. It has bound the nation together so that we present a fairly solid front to the issue. We are not unmindful of the suffering of Teutonic peoples, and even in our hostility we shall not cease to be sorry for them and compassionate toward them.

Should we allow our motives to degenerate into a blind racial hatred for those people who are now our enemies then our own nation will become hopelessly divided and a democracy that is humanitarian will become a conglomerate that is devilish. We go into battle for certain high humanitarian conceptions. They must be maintained. In the minds of all people our participation must be kept clearly associated with the ideals of international security and the popular well-being. The nations of the world need purging. America with all the rest. If governments had planned for the general welfare, the world would not now be in tears, and the scientific knowledge and technical skill of mankind would not now be dedicated to humanity's destruction. Had the nations of the world been just, the high loyalty of manhood and its enthusiastic self-dedication would all be devoted to the development of human life rather than its undoing. Had nations been wise and kind in their domestic laws, the maddest tragedy this side of Calvary would not today be in process of enactment, and the high attainments, noble impulses and divine gifts of men would now be working together for the redemption of mankind and for the fulfilment of his divine function. We have much that is sordid and selfish of which we must be purged. Patriotism must become another name for prayer. By keeping in mind the Christian ideals, even as we fight to make fighting less probable in the future, we should give to those ideals a more universal acknowledgment and shall be able to carry into the counsels of the nations the spirit of the cross.

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